

POWER LINE HEARINGS SET TO BEGIN SOON

By The Associated Press

GREAT FALLS - The Alberta Energy and Utilities Board will begin hearings Oct. 16 on the Alberta portion of a proposed cross-border power transmission line connecting electric systems in the Canadian province and Montana.

The hearings in Lethbridge will involve a three-member panel examining the evidence and listening to testimony. The panel will make a decision within 90 days of the conclusion of the hearings.

Approval from the Alberta board is the last of two clearances required in Canada. In April, the National Energy Board, Canada's equivalent of the U.S. Department of Energy, issued a permit to construct and operate an international power line.

In the United States, the project needs permits from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality and the federal Energy Department.

"We haven't put out a decision yet that determines whether this line is needed or not," said Bob Curran, spokesman for the Alberta board. "We remain completely neutral at this point."

Officials with the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board expect the October hearings on the Montana Alberta Tie Ltd. line to last two weeks, although three weeks have been set aside for the proceedings.

The process is more formal than the public hearings held by the Montana DEQ and will include the presentation of evidence, cross examination and lawyers representing "interveners" - supporters and opponents who have "standing" because they are directly affected by the proposed line.

Landowners who oppose the plan will be part of the process, along with wind-farm developers who would benefit from construction of the new transmission line.

The proposed 215-mile, 230-kilovolt line would be a conduit for 600 megawatts of electricity, with 300 megawatts traveling in each direction, between the Alberta Interconnected Electric System and the electric transmission network in Montana. Building the line is projected to cost about \$120 million.

The Energy and Utilities Board made headlines recently with the revelation that it hired investigators with a private security firm to spy on opponents of a different power line project, a proposed 500-kilovolt transmission line between Edmonton and Calgary.

Investigators mingled with the landowners and their attorneys for weeks as they gathered in the town of Rimbey's recreation center, where opponents were watching closed-circuit TV coverage of an Energy and Utilities Board hearing on the power line.

Board officials said the security measures at Rimbey were taken because staff members previously were physically attacked and threatened. Board Chairman William Tilleman announced last week that the Energy and Utilities Board security unit had disbanded and that its members are no longer with the agency.

Two investigations were conducted into the hiring of the security firm.

"In both cases, they ruled we shouldn't have done that," Curran said.

Tom Ring of the Montana DEQ said state authorities followed the case in the media, "but it's kind of an aside for what we have to do here in terms of permitting."